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ABSTRACT

Controlled school choice attempts to provide choice while maintaining ethnic and racial integration. The following elements are found in most controlled-choice plans: (1) any program that is successful in one zone must be replicated in all the other zones; (2) parent information centers are available to help parents make educated choices; (3) low-performing and unpopular schools are assisted in their efforts to improve; and (4) clear assignment criteria are utilized to avoid subjective and unfair assignments. Most controlled-choice districts assign about 75 percent of students to their first choice, and 10 percent to their second choice. Evidence from Cambridge, Massachusetts, indicates that controlled choice has been improving educational quality. (8 references) (MLF)

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Controlled Choice: An Alternative School Choice Plan

by Tyler Weaver

School choice is one of the hottest topics in education. Not only does it have the attention of educators, it has the endorsement of President Bush and a large following of parents. Books are being written, arguments waged, and bills drafted. There is a growing feeling that if parents can choose which schools their children attend, education will improve.

However, there are groups urging caution. Some are concerned that issues of equity will be passed over in the push for school choice, causing at-risk students to fall further behind. Because of these concerns, choice plans that focus on equity have begun to receive national attention. Foremost among these is *controlled choice*, which attempts to create equitable education in a district by providing choice while simultaneously preserving racial and ethnic balance.

What Is Controlled Choice?

Controlled choice differs from other choice plans, such as open enrollment and voucher models, in that it does not rely on market competition between schools to initiate school improvement (Chubb and Moe 1990). As one of the original designers of controlled choice has written, the market analogy "is inappropriate in an educational situation" because it ignores the social aspect of education by promoting strong schools rather than nurturing weak ones (Willie 1990/91).

Controlled choice attempts to provide choice while maintaining ethnic and racial integration. Controlled choice plans do away with neighborhood attendance districts, create zones, and allow families to choose within their zone, provided that admitting students to their school of choice does not upset the racial and ethnic balance at that school (Alves and Willie 1990).

A few cities have used controlled choice since the 1970s, but most programs are patterned after a plan that was first implemented in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1981. Designed by Michael Alves and Charles Willie, the Cambridge plan has evolved into a system where new families visit a central registration area, choose four schools, and rank them in order of preference. The district reviews the lists and tries to assign students to their choices, but it also tries to ensure that no school exceeds its capacity and all schools reflect the district's racial and ethnic composition (Tan 1990). Not all students receive their first preference, but a balance is struck between allowing parents and students some choice while ensuring that schools remain integrated, with the overall intent of school improvement (Yanofsky and Young 1992).

What Other Cities Have Controlled Choice Plans?

Controlled choice in general and the Cambridge plan in particular have stirred up both local and national interest. In Massachusetts, several cities have adopted it, most notably Boston (Alves and Willie 1990). Alves and Willie also have created or are creating plans for several other cities, including Milwaukee, Seattle, San Jose, Little Rock, Hartford, and Rockville, Maryland (Alves, personal communication; Willie 1990/91). A handful of cities, including White Plains, New York (Yanofsky and Young), have independently adopted it.

Most of these districts adopted controlled choice in response to changing demographics and previous desegregation plans that did not work. In Cambridge, it was a response to a failed magnet school program (Tan); in Boston, it followed fifteen years of divisive busing (Alves and Willie); in White Plains, it replaced a plan that was over twenty years old (Yanofsky and Young).

What Are the Elements of Controlled Choice?

Although most districts adopt a controlled-choice plan primarily as a means of achieving desegregation, it does more than just desegregate. The following elements, found in most plans, are what make controlled choice more than just a desegregation system.

Replication of Successful Programs. Controlled choice reorganizes residential attendance areas into zones that may not be equal in quality of education when they are created. To ensure that no student has fewer or less desirable choices than others, any program that is successful in one zone must be replicated in all the other zones (Alves and Willie). In smaller cities, this is not a problem (Yanofsky and Young), but in large urban areas such as Boston and Seattle, replication is difficult, yet vital to establishing educational equity (Glenn 1990-91).

Parent Information Centers. The success of any choice plan can hinge on whether parents have the information they need to make educated choices. Many districts follow the example of Cambridge, which has a center that

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issues all publications in multiple languages, offers tours, makes phone calls to homes, and compiles data on each school (Tan). These centers help parents research their choices and have the additional benefit of encouraging parent involvement (Yanofsky and Young).

School Improvement. In contrast to the competition between schools that a voucher plan might generate, controlled-choice districts assist low-performing and unpopular schools in their efforts to improve. In Boston, the district urges unsuccessful schools to improve by offering them funds and granting them more flexibility in their restructuring attempts (Glenn).

Fair Assignment Criteria. Although controlled-choice districts cannot assign all students to their first-choice schools, districts try to avoid subjective and unfair assignments by establishing clear assignment criteria. This process is often as simple as prioritizing factors such as whether a family has other children in the chosen school, what a student's racial/ethnic background is, where a family lives, and when the application was turned in (Yanofsky and Young).

How Much Choice Does Controlled Choice Offer?

The primary controversy regarding controlled choice concerns whether it is still choice if it is controlled. Since no controlled-choice district can send every student to his or her first choice, the number of students getting their schools of choice versus the number bused to an undesirable school is a point of contention.

Most controlled-choice districts assign about 85 percent of students to one of their first two choices (75 percent first, 10 percent second) (Alves, personal communication) and 90 percent to one of their choices (Glenn), leaving about 10 percent attending schools they did not choose.

Some argue that a certain amount of forced busing is a tradeoff, since controlled choice dramatically reduced the amount of forced busing in several districts. In the first year of controlled choice in Boston, for example, the number of students bused forcibly dropped by 60 percent (Alves, personal communication).

However, most critics of controlled choice agree with Thernstrom (1991), who argues that "there is too little choice in controlled choice" and that any and all "involuntary assignments are indefensible."

Does the Quality of Education Improve with Controlled Choice?

The other major issue is whether controlled-choice plans actually improve schools. In the words of Chubb and Moe, the Cambridge plan "does not go far enough," in that all choices and changes "remain firmly under the control of all the usual democratic institutions." A step has been taken in the right direction, they argue, but the full benefits of choice will not be realized until districts remove all controls and force schools to compete against one another.

Thernstrom asserts that parent centers provide districts with a means to manipulate choices by making unpopular, low-quality schools appear attractive. These types of controls, she contends, negate improvement efforts because they provide schools with students and money without forcing them to improve.

Largely because most controlled-choice plans are so new, the jury is still out on how much improvement controlled choice has stimulated in schools. Many districts are still working on effective improvement plans, and, in the case of Boston, which adopted controlled choice in 1989, "it is clear that there is nothing simple or automatic about harnessing choice to school improvement" (Glenn).

Cambridge provides the most comprehensive data regarding the relationship between controlled choice and school improvement. In the first years of controlled choice there, when the student mixtures in Cambridge schools were altered, dramatic changes occurred in test scores. For example, after four years at the elementary school that used to have the highest achievement, the number of students who passed the district tests had dropped by 6 percent from first-year levels. However, the previously worst school had improved by 28 percent, and the district as a whole had passed 14 percent more students. Since then, Cambridge students have performed below the state average but better than students in similar districts, and their scores have continued to rise (Tan). This seems to indicate that, at least in Cambridge, controlled choice has been improving educational quality.

On the national level, however, controlled choice has yet to prove itself. As Chubb and Moe imply, perhaps it is a stepping stone to a better system. Nonetheless, for the time being at least, controlled choice is a reasonable alternative for districts concerned with establishing educational equity within the context of school choice.

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